

The Student Body: Promoting Health at Any Size

Background Information for Teachers : Media and Peer Pressure



- Research reveals that a very high percentage of girls and women in our society are dissatisfied with their bodies (up to 80%). In comparison, about 40-60% of males are dissatisfied with their body shape. Children as young as six have a fear of fat. One identified reason is the exposure to unrealistic body shape ideals in the media (magazines, TV, videos) and peer pressure to conform.

- Evidence suggests that the timing of puberty (a time when girls experience natural increases in fat and weight) happens to coincide with girls' interest in beauty magazines. For example, a study by the magazine "Seventeen," (with a readership of 11,000,000 girls), showed that early adolescent girls were more likely than older adolescents to seek out the magazine for health information.



- Many of the female models in the fashion magazine are 15 - 25% below average weight (for their height and age) and computer imaging is used to enhance their appearance. Recent research has shown that the amount of magazine reading is positively correlated with internalization of thin ideals, which in turn is correlated with negative body image and unhealthy eating behaviours.

- Some of the messages in fashion magazines are unhealthy. In some cases, less than 1,200 calories a day (as compared to the recommended 2,400 calories a day) was recommended in nutrition articles, with an emphasis on good versus bad foods. Exercise was recommended for the purpose of calorie burning instead of for fun and fitness. A later section on healthy eating explains how important nutrients are for girls during this rapid growth period (e.g. for bone density).



- The belief that being thin will increase how much peers like them, and messages from peers (e.g. being teased about their weight), have been shown to predict girls' body concerns. Research reveals that increasingly, boys are showing concerns about being too big or too small.

- Sharing information with students about how their bodies naturally grow during puberty (up to 22% increase in fat and 5-10 pound increase in weight among girls) and emphasizing the need to appreciate and respect individual differences in growth patterns and in size (e.g. genetic influence, heritability of height and overall body shape) is crucial.

- Lack of exercise and diets consisting of too many fatty, low-nutrition foods are often pointed to as the main causes of obesity, yet it is now thought that genetic factors may also play a role in some cases. Twins research has revealed that genetic makeup plays an influential role -- about 90% -- in the development of obesity (making it as equally inheritable as height)..

- Media literacy is recommended as a prevention strategy and has been shown to be an effective technique to help improve self-esteem and body esteem, and reduce unhealthy dieting in young adolescent girls (McVey et al., 2003).

- Finally, help with communication and assertiveness skills is important for youth so that they can learn to stand up for themselves and their bodies (especially during early adolescence, when peer pressure to look a certain way is so strong).